

Let me wish you all a happy and holy Christmas.

If you get a Christmas card with a nativity scene on it it will usually be a pretty picture: a beautiful clean stable, soft light and happy people. But that is unreal. A stable is smelly, dark and dirty, with flies around it. Have you been to a stable?

The card shows all the good things: the baby, Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, wise men and angels, but forgets that Mary was a single mother with a baby after travelling 160km walking! She would be very tired and anxious. It forgets there was no room for him and it ignores Herod's rejection and attempt to kill him. These things are the real picture.

We make it all nice and happy when it was not so. Why? Why do we put this spin on the story? It is a make believe scene, a fairy tale picture of Jesus' birth.

Does it matter? We do want Christmas to be a happy time, but there is a problem when we do it by running away from the real Jesus.

At Christmas we can put on a false "friendliness" which is not real and only lasts for a few days. We send seasons greetings to people we don't see all year. We may even buy present for people we don't like. We may get together with people from work or even family that we can't stand. We pretend to be all jolly and wish them well.

But sometimes it's not real, a pretence. We call it the "Silly Season"! We have a few days holiday to get away from the reality of everyday life. So Christmas can become an escape from reality.

Some of this is fine, we may need a break and we should be friendly. But if we have a make-believe Jesus, a pretty Jesus, born in nice clean stable, this sort of Jesus cannot help with the realities of life. Only the real Jesus has power to make a difference in our lives and bring us into God's love.

But the real Jesus is not a pretty picture!

1. Jesus was born a real man.

⁶While they were in Bethlehem, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

(Luke 2:7)

He was born a helpless baby. There is nothing more human than a baby, dependant on his parents. He was not God pretending to be a person. He was truly one of us. We sing, "The little Lord Jesus no crying he makes". But that is unreal, he would have yelled and pooped his nappy. He was real baby.

The wise men looked for him in the palace, but he was born in small town in a stable, not with privileges and comfort. He came as a **real man** into this **real world** with all its troubles and sorrows.

2. Jesus experienced real life

He didn't have an easy life but one of suffering. He is called a "Man of sorrows". He wasn't a superman, one who does not feel pain. He was someone who experienced the things we experience; constantly criticised, misunderstood, and homeless; betrayed by one of his close followers, and denied by another; deserted by all his friends then unjustly condemned to death.

He experienced real physical suffering, torture, mocking and a dreadful death. This is the real Jesus. He didn't sit in ivory tower telling us to do the impossible. He's been there, done that and knows what we go through. Isn't this the sort of Jesus we need? Isn't this the sort of God we need?

We may feel when we are in difficulty "God is against me", he's sitting up there doing nothing. Bette Midler sang: "God is watching from a distance". But God is not watching from a distance. In Jesus God has been involved in the suffering of this world. He is on our side even when we don't understand why - Jesus lived a real life.

3. Jesus died a real death for us

Look at the real world: there are constant wars; there is terrorism, horrific acts of violence against innocent people. There is corruption among our politicians, and gun violence on our streets. There may be conflict in own families or families we know.

And in our own lives we often fail to live up to our own standards. Our thoughts may be jealous, unkind, resentful or proud. Our words can be cutting or untrue. At times our actions fall short of true love even for those nearest to us. This all shows that all is not well within us. This world is not a pretty picture. Our lives are not pretty picture.

The real problem of the world is human sin, yours and mine. The Bible shows that sin separates us from God. Our relationship with God had to be put right. Jesus came to deal with the real problem of the world; to die for us so could be forgiven and made right with God, and so we could have the power of God's Spirit to help us change.

The angel tells the shepherds: *"Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."* (2:11) It was Jesus' real death on a Roman cross that saves us, that brings us back into the arms of God's love and provides for our deepest need.

Our Christmas cards may look very pretty, but it is not the real picture. The real Jesus is not just a philosophy to help us deal with life. Christmas is not just a story to make us feel better, to help us forget reality for a while.

No. The real God who made this world, who made you, has a very real love for you. He has shown that love in his real Son, Jesus Christ, our Saviour.

Colin Buchanan put it well in his song Real Hope.

REAL HOPE

It was a real birth in a real stable
In a real dusty Judean town
And a real mother nursed her precious baby

And a bunch of wide-eyed
shepherds gathered round
And real angels sang "Glory!"
For real hope was born that day.

CHORUS

I bet all I have on Jesus
I will throw myself on Him
For the one who died
A real death for real sin
I bet all I have on Jesus
And throughout eternity
I will marvel at the real hope
That my Saviour won for me.

It was a real life
He had real friends
He walked shoulder to shoulder with the lost
He wept real tears
For the fallen ones
And he anguished over sin's dreadful cost
And on a real cross he cried
"Forgive them!"
As his real life drained away.

CHORUS

I have real fears
I do real sin
And I hurt the ones
I cherish and adore
But the real mercy
Of the true God
sees the filthy fallen purchased
and restored
And I cry "My God - O fill me
with a heart completely yours!"

CHORUS